

Oral Testimony of Tara J. Young, Democracy SoS Fellow, FairVote

**State Government Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives**

**Legislative Hearing on H.B. 520,
“An Act Amending Title 25 (Elections) of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes”
March 14, 2008**

Madman Chair, members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing and providing me the opportunity to discuss the voting rights of Pennsylvania's youth.

My name is Tara Young, and I am a Fellow at FairVote. FairVote is a non-partisan, non-profit, pro-democracy organization based in Washington, DC. We support House Bill 520 that will allow those who will be 18 years old by General Election Day to vote in the preceding primary.

If this policy were in effect this year an estimated 145,000 young people in Pennsylvania would have the opportunity to vote in next month's historic election. I agree with Time Magazine article by Tim Bingaman; it is the year of the youth vote.

Nationally, young people make up about one-fifth of the entire voting population, which are 44-million young people that can make a difference in an election. In that cover story, “The Year of the Youth Vote,” Time stated, 74 percent of 18-29 year olds are paying attention to the 2008 presidential race, which is a 30 percent increase from 2004.

The proof is the numbers; young people are inspired about voting and being heard in this election and elections in the future. Penn State Professor Eric Plutzer agrees. He notes, after his research, “virtually all major works on turnout have concluded that voting behavior is, in part, a gradually acquired habit.” The turnout among 18-29 year old voters during a midterm election increased by more than 2 million voters in the 2006 election compared to 2002, according to Young Voter Strategies, the research arm for Rock the Vote. In the 2004 Presidential Election, more than 20 million 18-29 year-olds voted, which was 4.3 million more than in 2000. All signs indicate that the young adults who voted in these elections are much more likely to vote again this November.

In other words, more young adults have become voters in the past two elections — they have become habitual voters.

Looking to November, young voters are likely to turn out in increased numbers yet again. Given the increase, the House Bill 520 could create a new habit for this voting block to vote in the primary, which is equally important as the general election. Voting in the primary, dictates the choice in the general election, and young people should have a voice in the choice.

More than having a voice, this bill allowing 17 year olds to vote in primary elections is a matter of basic fairness and good elections practices. Everyone who is eligible to vote in a general election should be able to vote in the primary. Ensuring that all general election voters are able to vote in the preceding primary is also good for candidates, and for the political system. More involvement and energy in the primary process means stronger general election turnout and an opportunity for candidates to seek the broadest possible support.

Right now, 18 states or state parties allow anyone who is registered and eligible to vote in the general election to vote in their state's primary. States that ensure the voting rights of young people include Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, Ohio, Oregon and Virginia, to name a few.

In Maryland, the state attorney general recently overturned a rule, which allowed eligible 17 year olds to vote in primaries. After the investigation, FairVote and Maryland's Democratic and Republican parties requested the state's attorney general respectfully review the December 2006 decision in light of the state parties' first amendment freedom of association rights under *Tashjian vs. Connecticut* (1986). The Maryland attorney general reviewed the parties' argument and the State board of elections restored 17 year olds voting rights.

This all started because a young woman from Maryland noticed the unfairness, and wanted the right to fully participate. Sarah Boltuck, who will be 18 in July, told the Washington Post, "I thought that was one of my rights as a citizen of Maryland – I had assumed that when I registered to vote, it'd be no problem."

But to her surprise there was, but Maryland made it right. The young people here today and the 145,000 high school seniors in your state, who may turn 18 after the Pennsylvania's primary, are requesting this honorable body does the right thing, and pass House Bill 520. Every American has the right to be a full participant. I respectfully encourage this committee to recommend this bill for a vote, and encourage your colleagues to pass House Bill 520. Again, when young people vote, democracy wins, if democracy wins – we all win.